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ABSTRACT

This essay deals with the necessity of explaining death to children, and offers guidelines as to how parents can do this. It points out that ignoring the child's need to confront the issue of death can only be harmful, depriving him of the opportunity to share his grief. The author suggests that parents be honest with their children about death, be receptive to the child's feelings and bewilderment, and encourage the child to verbalize his fantasies and fears. (NG)

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EXPLAINING DEATH TO CHILDREN

Earl A. Grollman

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Explaining Death to Children

Earl A. Grollman

A child growing up today is all too aware of the reality of death, perhaps more than parents realize. Even at a very young age children are confronted with that instance when life no longer exists: pet is killed; funeral procession passes by; grandfather dies; leader is assassinated. And, of course, there is television with the picture of death in vivid color.

The small child tries out the word "death" and rolls it around the tongue. He closes his eyes, lies on the ground, and imagines what death must feel like. He loves to blow out a lighted match and inquires; "Where did the light go? Is it gone forever? If you die, do you ever come back?"

And when death does occur, the bereaved adults are often so upset by their own sense of loss that they may say nothing to their offspring. They imagine that either the fact of death is beyond a child's comprehension or that they can protect the youngster from the anguish which they themselves feel.

But the child has every right to be included in that situation which seriously affects him both as an individual and as a member of a family. Silence only deprives him of the opportunity to share his grief.

Of course, the adult himself may not understand the complete meaning of death. No mortal has ever pierced the veil of its great mystery. Yet the wise parent has the inescapable responsibility to share with his youngster the fragments of adult experience and knowledge. There is no justification in leaving the bewildered child to muddle through as best he can.

While insight is a gift, parents must first place themselves in a position to receive it. They must prepare themselves for it. They must be quiet and learn to listen to their children. They must sit down and watch them while they work and play. They must observe them in action and hear the tone and timbre of their voices. The youngsters should be encouraged to tell the

adults how they feel about death, what they think, what they know, where they need to go. Parents should respond by trying to let the youngsters know that they understand what the children are trying to say. Adults should attempt to answer the question in the spirit in which it is asked.

Do not teach the child as if you have final answers which he must accept. Adults show their maturity when they respond: "Are you surprised that I do not know everything about death. Don't be. Yet we can still talk about it. You can learn something from me. I can learn something from you. We can help each other." As parents confront crucial issues, they will learn along with their children.

General Guidelines

Just as you cannot protect yourself from the sorrow surrounding death, so you cannot defend your offspring. The mental health of us all is not the denial of tragedy but the frank acknowledgment of painful separation.

The child should be able to discuss death with his family before crisis strikes. Talk in a quiet, honest, and straightforward way so as to encourage further dialogue. The learning process should be in gradual stages according to the youngster's intellectual and emotional capabilities. Begin at the offspring's level and remember that attitude is more important than words.

Never tell the child what he will later need to unlearn. Avoid fairy tales, half-truths, and circumlocutions. Imaginative fancy only gets in the youngster's way when he is having enough trouble separating the real from the make-believe.

The involvement of the offspring in the sorrow of the family can be a source of maturation. Not only does the child receive love but he is given the opportunity to love in return. He gains strength by giving strength. Reassurance comes from the presence of loving people.

Allow the child to give vent to his emotions of grief. Anger, tears, guilt, despair and protest are natural reactions to family disorganization.

Encourage the youngster to discuss his innermost fantasies and fears and feelings. The child needs to talk not just to be talked to. He should be given every opportunity to reminisce about the person who died and, if he so desires, may express anger as well as affection.

Do not close the door to doubt, questioning, and difference of opinion. Respect the offspring's own personality, for in the long run, it is he who must find his own answers to the problems of life and death.

It must be remembered that young people vary in their reactions. There is no single procedure and formula that will fit all youngsters either at the time of death or the period that follows. There are so many variables: How close was the child to the deceased? How, when, and where were the circumstances of death? What is his concept of death? How do significant adults react? What is the offspring's physical and emotional health? What have been his prior experiences with loss? There are differences in grief reactions because of unique conditions, feelings, and attitudes. Like adults, children, too, must be understood and valued.

Talking about death is often a complex and disturbing task. There are times when even the best informed and well-intentioned parents are simply inadequate. Seeking help from a therapist (psychologist or child guidance clinic) is not an admission of weakness, but a demonstration of strength and love.

In the end, of course, what you are will determine what you teach your offspring. If parents are disturbed by the thought of death, their children will feel anxieties and tensions too. Regardless of language employed, emotional tones are transmitted. The real challenge is not just how to explain death to your children but how to understand and make peace with it yourself.